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Source: *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (Apr., 1955), pp. 416-428

Published by: [Council on Foreign Relations](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20031108>

Accessed: 14/06/2014 14:13

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MILITARY POLICY AND DEFENSE OF THE "GREY AREAS"

By Henry A. Kissinger

IT is surprising how little affected American strategic thinking has been by the fact that within just a few years the U.S.S.R. will have the capacity to deliver a powerful attack with nuclear weapons on the United States. To be sure, advocates of radical solutions propose to cut the Gordian knot by a policy of preventive war. But there has always been an air of unreality about a program so contrary to the sense of the country and the constitutional limits within which American foreign policy must be conducted. For the rest, there seems to be such general agreement about the main lines of American strategy that some of the recent transformations in our strategic position are rarely publicly debated.

Whether these postulates of American strategic thought are interpreted in Secretary Dulles' "massive retaliation" speech and subsequent article,¹ in Vice-President Nixon's reply to Adlai Stevenson of March 13, 1954, or in Mr. Finletter's lucid book, "Power and Policy,"² they amount to the assertion that the chief deterrent to Soviet aggression resides in United States nuclear superiority. The corollary is that the United States must not exhaust itself in a "war of attrition" in peripheral areas or keep in being a force so large as to drain our economy without adding to our effective strength on A-Day (the hypothetical date of the outbreak of nuclear war).³ Since only the threat of "massive retaliation" can deter Soviet aggression, major reliance must be placed on the development of our Strategic Air Force and on increasing the power of our nuclear arsenal. Since the Sino-Soviet bloc possesses interior lines of communication and is therefore able to choose the point of attack, we must not let them lure us into areas where we would be strategically at a disadvantage. Instead, we should inhibit aggression at its source by the threat of a general war. To be sure, there are some areas where we shall resist aggression on the ground, the NATO region for example, and for the defense of these it is considered that conventional

¹ "Policy for Security and Peace," by John Foster Dulles, *Foreign Affairs*, April 1954.

² Thomas K. Finletter, "Power and Policy." New York: Harcourt, 1954.

³ Finletter, *op. cit.*, p. 231.

forces perhaps backed by nuclear weapons are essential. But in the remainder of the world, the part which Mr. Finletter calls the "grey areas," Sino-Soviet moves can be prevented only by the threat of a general war. This in substance seems to be the rationale for our present military policy.

The argument is persuasive. It has the advantage of fitting in with the historical experience of a nation which, for over a century, felt secure from hostile attack. And it is reinforced by the memory of the Korean conflict which has come to symbolize the frustration experienced in waging peripheral wars. But one of a nation's most difficult tasks is to interpret its past correctly. However efficacious the threat of a general war may have been during the period of American nuclear monopoly or near-monopoly, it takes on a different aspect when we consider the soon-to-be atomic stalemate. And however costly the Korean war may have been, it still may prove a better model for our future strategy than an all-out atomic conflict. For the increasing Soviet nuclear capability has transformed power relationships not only quantitatively but qualitatively. While the United States enjoyed an absolute atomic monopoly, even a small number of nuclear weapons had a powerful deterrent effect. But as the Soviet capability to retaliate on American cities becomes imminent a new dimension is added to the United States strategic problem. No matter how vast our remaining margin in number and technological refinement of the ultimate weapons, henceforth not only *they* but *we* must fear them. In these circumstances a major or exclusive reliance on general war as a deterrent to Sino-Soviet aggression may come dangerously close to a Maginot mentality—a belief in a strategy which may never be tested but which meanwhile prevents the consideration of any alternative. If we accept an all-or-nothing military policy we may well find ourselves paralyzed in the years ahead, when the increasing Soviet nuclear capability undermines our willingness to run the risk of a general war for anything less than to counter a direct attack on the United States.

And it would seem the height of folly for the Soviet Union to attack the United States directly and thereby unleash S.A.C. The Soviets can achieve their ultimate goal, the neutralization of the United States, at much less risk by gradually eroding the peripheral areas, which will imperceptibly shift the balance of power against us without ever presenting us with a clear-cut challenge.

It may be argued, of course, that they will not attempt to absorb the peripheral areas if it means the destruction of Moscow or Peking. But this is merely begging the principal question—whether as the Soviet supply of nuclear weapons grows, as well as the capacity to deliver them, nuclear war does not become a double-edged sword? The more fearful the weapons, the more risky their use. And the more risky their use, the more the Soviet strategic problem is reduced to presenting its challenges in such a manner that the pressures for solutions short of war will be maximized not only with our European allies but in this country also. If we refused to fight in Indo-China when the Soviet nuclear capability was relatively small because of the danger that a limited war might become general, we shall hardly be readier to risk nuclear bombing for the sake of Burma or Iran or even Yugoslavia. On the contrary, as Soviet nuclear strength increases, the number of areas that will seem worth the destruction of New York, Detroit or Chicago will steadily diminish.

There is no doubt that we must have a powerful nuclear arsenal and the best strategic air force, if only to discourage an attack on us. But the power of these should not blind us to their limitations as instruments of the cold war, particularly to the fact that exclusive reliance on them runs counter to a coalition policy even within the NATO area and that there must be a point beyond which development of them will yield diminishing returns. What will be the advantage of accumulating a greater store of fission weapons than would be necessary to destroy every Soviet manufacturing center? Or of improving them to the point where one bomb can destroy an average city twice over? Nor should we overlook that certain technological advances—the atomic submarine, for example—will add much less to our effective strategic strength than to that of the Sino-Soviet bloc. Thus for the first time in military history there is the possibility of a stalemate despite an absolute superiority in number of weapons and in technology; and when this point has been reached the American strategic problem is transformed. The Red Army may have been immobilized by the American atomic monopoly, but it may be liberated by the Soviet capacity to retaliate on Washington. It is argued by some that the atomic stalemate is nothing new, that it has in fact existed on the Eurasian continent since 1949. But this is surely not the same as saying that it has been part of the American *consciousness* since then, and this is the crucial factor

in determining willingness to engage in a general war. The stalemate on the Eurasian continent has been maintained solely by the relative freedom of action of the United States. That is precisely why our nuclear arsenal is no better than our willingness to use it, and this is in danger of being reduced as the Soviet nuclear capacity grows.

An all-or-nothing military policy will also sap the vitality of our system of alliances. If we assert that nuclear weapons represent the only deterrents to Soviet aggression, one of two consequences becomes almost inevitable: either our Allies will feel that any military effort on their part is unnecessary, or they may be led to the conviction that peace is preferable to war almost at any price. With the end of the American monopoly of nuclear power our demonstrations of weapons in that field may actually work to Soviet advantage. Thus our explosion of the hydrogen bomb was certainly a factor in deterring British action in Indo-China. Our only policy consistent with a policy of alliances, therefore, is one which minimizes (or seems to minimize) the risks of nuclear war and at the same time offers protection against Soviet occupation through the use of conventional armies.

In short, the strategic problem of the United States has two aspects: to create a level of thermo-nuclear strength to deter the Soviet bloc from a major war, or from aggressions in areas which cannot be defended by an indigenous effort; but to integrate this with a policy which does not paralyze the will to resist in areas where local resources for defense do exist.

II

But is there any deterrent to Sino-Soviet aggression other than the threat of general war? Does not a policy of peripheral actions run counter to the geographic realities of the situation, specifically to the fact that the U.S.S.R. possesses interior lines of communication and can therefore assemble a superior force at any given point?

It must be admitted that we alone cannot possibly defend the Soviet periphery by local actions; nor can we intervene without the coöperation of the local governments. Our immediate task must be to shore up the indigenous will to resist, which in the "grey areas" means all the measures on which a substantial consensus seems to exist: a political program to gain the confidence of local populations and to remove the stigma of colonialism from

us, together with a measure of economic assistance and similar steps. But though a political program may be essential it will prove useless without an increase in the capacities for local defense. Few political leaders will run the risk of foreign occupation even though liberation is to follow eventually. The promise of victory in a general war will mean little to the leader of a threatened country which is meanwhile to be Sovietized. The strength of this feeling even in the NATO area is best expressed in an editorial in a leading German newspaper which has supported Chancellor Adenauer's foreign policy: "We must oppose any strategy the basic postulate of which involves giving up our territory. Our partnership in the Atlantic alliance means more to us than that our 12 divisions represent a strategic asset for the West; it includes a demand for the protection of the German people. . . . A substantial retreat is equivalent to our moral and physical destruction."⁴

The argument thus runs in a circle: Can the peripheral areas be defended, assuming the willingness of the countries concerned to resist and our readiness to help them? To support a negative answer such factors are cited as the "unlimited" Chinese manpower or the vast distances of the "grey areas" from the centers of our strength. Now to underestimate an adversary may be disastrous, but to overestimate his resources may lead to a needless paralysis of policy. Absolute numbers are important, but only the part which can be utilized effectively is strategically significant. In these terms Chinese manpower is limited by the Soviet-Chinese capacity to equip and train it, and Chinese effectiveness by the difficulty of communications and supply. The vision of hordes of Chinese streaming into the "grey areas" is unrealistic. If it were possible to develop indigenous armies of moderate size but substantial firepower these should be able to fight delaying actions until the arrival of reinforcements, particularly if American air power (perhaps carrier-based) were hampering Chinese movements. Nor can the Chinese keep pouring in men and supplies so far from their centers of production, despite the seemingly contrary lessons of the war in Korea. After the beginning of the armistice negotiations, the Korean war was fought under conditions nearly ideal for an army with inferior technology and air power: actions were always confined to a small segment of the front; they could be delayed until there had been an ade-

⁴ *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, December 2, 1954.

quate build-up; they could be broken off when stocks were depleted. The risks were always tactical and not strategic; the penalty for failure was limited by the self-imposed restrictions of the armistice negotiations. "Operation Strangle" therefore did not represent a fair test of the Chinese ability to sustain a major effort over a considerable period of time and in the face of superior air power. The only continuous drain on Chinese supplies occurred after the front was stabilized near Suwon in March 1951, and from then until the beginning of the armistice negotiations in June the Chinese were much closer to a decisive defeat than we. Had we committed even four more divisions, indeed even if we had put a time limit on the truce negotiations, we might have achieved a substantial military victory.

To be sure, the limitations imposed on the Chinese freedom of manœuvre by the narrow peninsula and the proximity of our bases in Japan gave us an advantage in Korea which probably could not be duplicated in other areas. On the other hand, certain circumstances were propitious for the Chinese also. Korea was close to their main production centers and to the Russian supply lines, and communications between Korea and China were good. Neither of these conditions would be duplicated in, for example, Southeast Asia. We thus might say that these are two prerequisites of effective local action by the United States: indigenous governments of sufficient stability so that the Soviets can take over only by open aggression, and indigenous military forces capable of fighting a delaying action. If these conditions are met, the American contribution to the defense of the "grey areas" will involve the creation of a strategic reserve (say in the Philippines, Malaya or Pakistan) capable of redressing the balance and of a weapons system capable of translating our technological advantage into local superiority.

This is difficult but not impossible. Of the countries around the Soviet periphery, only five possess insufficient forces to put up an initial defense: Iran, Afghanistan, Burma, Thailand and Indo-China. India and Pakistan are protected by a difficult mountain-barrier and still more by the fact that an attack on them would almost certainly lead to a general war. As for the other countries, the defense of Afghanistan depends on the strength of Pakistan; an attack on Iran would have to reckon with the flanking position of Turkey; India would not look on an attack on Burma with equanimity and might intervene; while the fate of Thailand will

be decided in Indo-China, where an all-out American effort may still save at least Laos and Cambodia. It should not be beyond our capabilities, then, to create nucleus defense forces in the three critical countries: Iran (to help Turkey and Pakistan cover the Middle East), Pakistan (to strengthen Afghanistan and to back up Iran and Burma), and the Indo-Chinese states (to protect Malaya and Thailand). If concurrently we develop a supply system perhaps based on existing British facilities in Malaya, and develop a political program capable of enlisting the support of the countries concerned, we could bring about situations in which American local action is physically and psychologically possible. And once a certain level of indigenous power exists, a Chinese or Soviet attack can occur only after a period of build-up in the border areas which an effective intelligence system should be able to discover and which should give time for us to concentrate our forces or take political steps to avoid the conflict.

It is not at all obvious, therefore, that China or even the U.S.S.R. could utilize its interior position to assemble an overwhelming force at any given point around its periphery. But can we counter even the forces they are able to assemble? If we admit the local war thesis, do we not run the risk of having our army always at the wrong place? To be sure, China can pick the initial point of attack, but the greater mobility of her interior position is illusory because of the difficulties of communication. Once the Chinese are committed in an area, they are not able to shift their troops at will against our air power or with greater speed than we shift ours by sea. They cannot, in short, draw us into Indo-China and then attack in Burma with the same army. They can, of course, build up two armies, but we should be able to learn of this in time and then decide to defend one or the other area, or neither, depending on the strategic situation. In any case, the two armies cannot support each other (the classic advantage of interior lines). And this still leaves out of consideration the utilization of tactical nuclear weapons which would further increase the Sino-Soviet risk.⁵

But assuming its feasibility, should we permit ourselves to be drawn into a "war of attrition" with China? The ultimate answer will have to depend on local conditions and on the precise

⁵ For a useful discussion of a tactical nuclear weapons system see "Counter-Force Strategy," by T. F. Walcovicz, *Air Force*, February 1955; and "No Need to Bomb Cities to Win War," by Richard Leghorn, *U. S. News & World Report*, January 28, 1955.

circumstances in which the Chinese challenge is presented. But it seems clear that the "war of attrition" argument mistakes the crucial indices of modern war. The significant attrition of modern war is in matériel, and there would appear to be little likelihood that a state with a steel production of less than 10,000,000 tons annually could win a contest with the United States. Soviet help could certainly redress the balance to a degree, but we do not know to what extent the U.S.S.R. is prepared to go to save its Chinese allies in a crisis, above all if Chinese requests for help involve a sacrifice of its own economic goals. Soviet and Chinese difficulties would be increased if we coupled our intentions with face-saving devices and guarantees of the integrity of metropolitan China. Even with Soviet assistance, a protracted, large-scale military effort may lead to the stagnation, if not the exhaustion, of the Chinese régime. A war of attrition is the one war China could not win.

III

The ultimate argument for the little war thesis, however, must be in terms of the over-all requirements of United States security. The most frequent argument in favor of our maintaining a foothold on the Continent of Eurasia, and specifically in Western Europe, is, in military terms, that our whole strategy depends on the refueling facilities which our allies provide for our strategic air force. But we have a strategic interest in Eurasia independent of the range of our heavy bombers (which can, after all, be increased by technical advances), namely, the geopolitical fact that in relation to Eurasia the United States is an island Power with inferior resources at present only in manpower, but later on even in industrial capacity. Thus we are confronted by the traditional problem of an "island" Power—of Carthage with respect to Italy, of Britain with respect to the Continent—that its survival depends on preventing the opposite land-mass from falling under the control of a single Power, above all one avowedly hostile. If Eurasia were to fall under the control of a single Power or group of Powers, and if this hostile Power were given sufficient time to exploit its resources, we should confront an overpowering threat. At best we would be forced into a military effort not consistent with what is now considered the "American way of life." At worst we would be neutralized and would no longer be masters of our policy.

If this is true, we cannot cast off the "grey areas" without dire consequences. We may be able to win a war without their assistance, but we cannot survive a long period of peace without denying them to the U.S.S.R. If the United States ever became confined to "Fortress America," or even if Soviet expansion in the "grey areas" went far enough to sap our allies' will to resist, Americans would be confronted by three-quarters of the human race and not much less of its resources and their continued existence would be precarious.

But there is no necessity for this to occur. It should not be forgotten that the defense of the Free World is a problem not only of power but of will. In 1941 Germany alone nearly defeated the U.S.S.R. and today the combination of Western Europe and the United States should be able to contain it. The steel production of Western Europe still equals that of the U.S.S.R. In Asia, China appears as strong as she does at least partly because of the irresolution of her opponents. The task of creating a balance of power would therefore be far from hopeless if one considered nothing but the available resources. But while a balance is attainable along existing lines on the Eurasian continent, it will nevertheless always remain tenuous. As long as Soviet armies are poised on the Elbe, Western Europe will be insecure. As long as China strides unopposed through Southeast Asia, the uncommitted Powers will seek their safety in neutralism. The Soviet bloc presents to the outside world a vision of ruthless strength allied with artful cunning, of a constant readiness to utilize force coupled with the diplomatic skill to secure the fruits of such use. The United States, therefore, faces the task not only of stemming the Soviet tide but also of reducing the Soviet sphere and demonstrating the limitations of Soviet power and skills. The last is almost as important as the reduction of the Soviet sphere, for to the extent that the Free World, now swayed by a sense of its impotence, realizes that the Soviet bloc, too, behind its façade of monolithic power shrinks from certain consequences, its resolution and its policy will both become stronger.

A strategy which admits the *possibility* of fighting limited actions is more likely to achieve this objective than the threat of a total nuclear war. Since the destructiveness of strategic nuclear weapons has made them useless except for acts of desperation, the threat of massive retaliation will have two consequences: either the Sino-Soviet bloc will consider it a bluff and thus con-

front us again with the dilemma of Dienbienphu, or it will transform all contests into questions of prestige which will inhibit any concessions. An all-or-nothing military policy therefore makes for a paralysis of diplomacy. By leaving no alternative between total nuclear war and an uneasy armistice, it prevents attempts to ameliorate the situation progressively and supports the Soviet bloc's pose of moderation.

Actions short of total war, on the other hand, may help restore fluidity to the diplomatic situation, particularly if we analyze what is implied by the term "reduction of the Soviet sphere." The Sino-Soviet bloc can be reduced, short of waging a general war, in two ways: by a voluntary withdrawal or by an internal split. The former is unlikely and depends on many factors outside our control, but the latter deserves careful study. A great deal has been written about it, but this much seems clear: the rift will not come by itself. Too much is to be gained by unity, too many prizes are still to be won, the memory of Tito is still too fresh in the Kremlin, for us to be able to count on Soviet mistakes. A split between the U.S.S.R. and its satellites, and even more a split with China, can come about only through outside pressure, through the creation of contingencies which may force a divergence of views into the open. Thus Tito's break with the Cominform was due at least in part to his disenchantment over Molotov's lukewarm support on the Trieste issue, which in turn was caused by the U.S.S.R.'s unwillingness to risk a major war for a peripheral objective. The most fundamental indictment of our present military policy, then, is that its inability to differentiate its pressures may actually contribute to the consolidation and the unity of the Soviet bloc.

It is therefore misleading to attack the little war thesis on the ground that it does not offer a military solution to our strategic problem, for its merit is precisely that it may provide a political solution. Had we defeated the Chinese army in Korea in 1951 we would have confronted the U.S.S.R. with the dilemma whether to risk everything for the sake of increasing the power of China; and had we followed our victory with a conciliatory political proposal to Peking we could have caused it to reflect whether American good will might not represent a better protection than blindly following the Soviet line. But even if we had failed in our primary task of dividing the U.S.S.R. and China, we would have greatly improved our position towards our allies and even more

towards the uncommitted nations in Asia. The best counter-argument to the charge of colonialism is political moderation after a military victory. Indo-China gave us a similar opportunity, if under less favorable circumstances, although the Indo-Chinese problem would hardly have assumed its present dimensions had China suffered a decisive reversal in her first military encounter with the United States. Thus, if limited actions are implemented as part of a policy which offers the other side a way out short of total surrender or total war, they may bring about local reversals which may start chain reactions difficult to control and might magnify the tensions within the Soviet bloc. In such a strategy our nuclear superiority and our strategic air force would become a means to permit us to fight local actions on our terms or to shift the opus for a general war onto the Soviet bloc.

IV

But what if the local war should become general? Would we then not have isolated ourselves? To pose the question in the abstract is to prejudge the issue because it assumes that the present course will not lead to our isolation, albeit slowly. Something more fundamental is involved—a misapprehension of the nature of collective security. It is often said that the two world wars would have been avoided if the aggressors had been aware of the forces which would eventually be aligned against them. But even granting this proposition, it would be paradoxical if the Power strong enough to resist local aggressions *alone* were prevented from doing so by a doctrine of collective security.

An alliance represents an increase in strength only when its members agree on the nature of the danger. For it is not the fact that an alliance exists which deters an aggressor but the spirit of determination which animates it, as the fate of the French system of alliances in the inter-war period showed. To ask unstable NATO governments which are hard put to play a European rôle to make themselves responsible for what we do in Asia is to demand the impossible. Even if we are able to induce them to support us by economic pressure and by considerations of long-range strategy, we shall certainly undermine their domestic support. Thus it becomes important to consider whether the military assistance they can give us in peripheral wars is worth this price. The only contingency in which an allied military contribution is essential is a general war or an attack on the NATO

areas, which amounts to the same thing. In local wars we do not need them and should not insist on their assistance if they have no direct interest at stake. This is not to argue that "going it alone" is a virtue in itself. We must in any case be able to count on the support of Britain and the Commonwealth in Southeast Asia. Only we cannot permit the balance of power to be overturned for the sake of maintaining the form of allied unity.

The way in which a policy that does not exclude the possibility of fighting local wars affects our strategy in a general war therefore depends on two factors: (a) how the local war comes about; (b) how the general war develops from it. Clearly, the little war thesis is no better than the policy into which it is integrated and clearly American intervention can never take place *ad hoc*. The efficacy of the little war thesis depends, then, on the nature of our leadership. If we demonstrate that we are able to use our strength with moderation, that we know alternatives other than to talk nuclear war or surrender, we might bring about the psychological climate which will make limited actions supportable.⁶ If such local wars as we may fight come about not as acts of truculence but as a last resort, they need not undermine our relations with our allies; and if then it were the other side which opted for *general* war the moral basis of our diplomacy would not have been badly prepared.

Thus our capacity to fight local wars is not a marginal aspect of our effective strength; it is a central factor which cannot be sacrificed without impairing our strategic position and paralyzing our policy. The risks involved in an all-or-nothing military policy are so fearful that if we follow it our resolution will weaken and leave the initiative to the other side. A military policy which cannot offer the uncommitted nations protection against Sino-Soviet occupation will defeat our attempts to rally them to our side and in time it will even demoralize the NATO alliance. This would be true even if it should be maintained that our present force levels do not absolutely preclude local actions; valid as this contention may be in the abstract it is unrealistic psychologically. The unlikelihood that a chief-of-staff would commit an army of the present size in peripheral actions is demonstrated by General Ridgway's attitude with regard both to Indo-China and the Chinese offshore islands.

⁶ For a discussion of the diplomacy consistent with this conception of the American rôle see the author's "American Policy and Preventive War," *The Yale Review*, Spring 1955.

The impact of our military policy on Sino-Soviet calculations may prove even more pernicious. The destructiveness of nuclear weapons having made it unlikely that any responsible statesman will lightly unleash a general war, the greatest danger of war—unless the Soviet leaders have become totally reckless—will lie in a miscalculation on their part. This is the only war which it is within our power to avoid, assuming that we leave no doubt about our capabilities and determination. But even this “avoidable” war may break out if the other side becomes convinced that we cannot interfere locally and that our threats of instant retaliation are bluff. If that should happen, the other side may then decide, as its nuclear arsenal grows, to absorb the “grey areas” and confront us with the choice between relinquishing them or risking the destruction of American cities. And because the Sino-Soviet leaders may well be mistaken in their assessment of our reaction when faced with such an alternative, our present military policy may bring about the total war which it seeks to prevent. An improvement in our capacity for local war is therefore indicated not only by considerations of national strategy but as our best chance to preserve the peace.